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U.S. Department of Agriculture
Office of the Secretary

For Immediate Release

NEW APPROACHES FOR A NEW DECADE

I want to welcome you to our Nation's Capital.

We share your concerns about agriculture and rural families; about communities and their citizens; and about the natural resources on which they all depend.

We welcome your suggestions for the future, whether you are a conservation district official, or a state agency leader, or another partner in soil and water conservation.

Last month there was a unique conference here, geared specifically to the future--to the middle of the 21st century. It was designed by and for some of the best authorities in futures forecasting, top staff of the administration, and the best and most concerned members of Congress. It will produce some fresh ideas.

My feeling is that America's actions in the 1980's regarding food-and-fiber and natural resources policies may well have the strongest influence in shaping the society and the landscape of the next century.

Remarks prepared for delivery by Bob Bergland, Secretary of Agriculture, before the annual convention of the National Association of Conservation Districts, Washington, D. C., February 12, 1979

Your NACD "Resources Agenda for the 80's is right on the mark!

The more that the topics within your agenda can be discussed, weighed and acted upon, the closer I believe we will come to guiding America toward the 21st century in the directions that you want.

We need fresh ideas and new approaches.

I am very proud of what USDA agencies in partnership with you have accomplished in safeguarding and improving natural resources. You have had a significant impact in making land improvements and bringing about changes in rural land use to a degree almost beyond belief for a voluntary, cooperative program.

We have done a lot of things right!

Yet, there are danger signals that we may not be doing enough; that we may have done a few things wrong; that we may not be able to meet tomorrow's needs with today's programs.

There are areas of the United States where the transformation from the conditions of the "Dirty Thirties" has truly been remarkable. There are many other spots where a good job is being done through your persistent efforts. Yet in too many other areas soil loss is still tremendous.

In some areas, writers have termed soil erosion the worst ever.

For a national program almost half a century old, involving millions of people and billions of private and public dollars, this is not easy to explain.

It makes me uncomfortable.

I know it makes many of you uncomfortable.

I do not believe we should come up with better explanations for continuing resource problems. Rather, I think we should bring about better programs and better participation in them.

At the beginning of the conservation movement in the United States, overplowing of the Great Plains led to dust storms that traveled hundreds--sometimes thousands--of miles. Some of the finest cropland in the Southeast was eroded to a point where it seemed impossible to repair. Thousands of farms throughout the Nation were abandoned because their owners believed the soil was worn out.

A few hundred thousand dollars were appropriated in 1929 for some preliminary investigations--the "Buchanan Amendment." And that didn't solve the soil-erosion crisis.

In 1933 the Soil Erosion Service was established in the Department of the Interior.

It took only two years to decide that a Soil Conservation Service in the Department of Agriculture made more sense, because a "delivery system" for many services to rural people was already in place.

The Government bought some of the worst land, and on it and on a few dozen demonstration projects around the country showed some useful soil and water conservation techniques. Those purchased lands later became our National Grasslands, now managed by the Forest Service.

The demonstrations helped. We got a little more "expertise," but the soil erosion problem still wasn't solved.

It took only another two years to suggest and begin organizing soil conservation districts, where local initiative and responsibility could make stewardship of the land more acceptable. The movement spread steadily and successfully.

But soil erosion and related natural resource problems continued. USDA then began a cost-sharing program as an incentive for conservation. The Agricultural Conservation Program has been an important tool for many landowners, yet it didn't solve the whole problem, either.

Alongside our land conservation programs came a series of water-related efforts to prevent or control floods--on big river systems, and then on creek-sized watersheds. The land treatment phases of these programs have had a great effect. But soil erosion was still with us.

In 1956, we began a Great Plains Conservation Program for those ten states that share the unique climate that produces bumper crops and dust bowls. It has been popular, it has been amended and extended, it has brought millions of acres back to a healing cover of grass.

But soil erosion was still a problem.

In the early 1960's we combined natural resource concerns with economic and community issues in RC&D projects or areas. Thousands of "measures" or actions on the land have contributed directly to reducing soil erosion. Yet the problem was still with us.

In the late 1960's, we saw water-pollution control legislation and then a National Environmental Policy Act. In the 1970's we have seen a number of Federal and state programs to motivate or mandate, or somewhere in between, on farmland or mined land. Excessive soil erosion still hasn't been stopped.

Now, this outline of the past 50 years has been very sketchy; it misses some programs, it misses many accomplishments.

But, it does suggest that no matter how many programs have been added, we still haven't quite licked soil erosion, or a number of the problems related to it. We need a redoubled effort--but I want to stress that I don't believe we ever will be able to say we have completely solved any natural resource problem. America needs a continuing program that fits changing needs and changing objectives--that adapts to change and helps create change.

Soil erosion used to be unacceptable because it deteriorated the land. That reason may not have brought enough support from people who didn't live on the land or didn't notice the loss.

Gradually, people recognized that the eroded material became sediment that clogged or covered things downstream. They caught on that soil erosion was not just a farm problem, but needed attention as well in urbanizing areas; on surface mines; in coastal zones; and along streambanks and roadsides.

In the 1970's, soil erosion became unacceptable because it deteriorated water quality--by the sediment itself and by wastes and chemicals carried with the sediment. It became unacceptable because removing sediment and repairing land and stream corridors are a tremendous waste of energy resources.

In this decade, soil erosion and other problems came to be recognized not as separate problems to be dealt with individually but instead as symptoms of a lack of agreement in the community over land use and management.

The control of soil erosion is important, not for any one of these reasons but for <u>all of them</u>.

We need to help all people and all groups to see that it is in their best interest to make sure that soil and other natural resources are sustained.

At the same time, we cannot and we will not create new Federal programs that will solve all the problems by themselves. We could not pay for them. We could not staff them. A complete regulatory program could not find enough policemen to make it work...and such a program would be as unacceptable as the problems it would address.

Inflation is the number one problem that America must address. Therefore, we will need to do a better job of natural resource improvement on a tight a purse string and on as brief an organizational chart as we can manage.

How can we do it?

--By determining our most important priorities and giving them proper attention at the expense of some lesser priorities.

--By seeing to it that every program at the local, state, and Federal level operates efficiently and effectively.

--By making sure that every program is part of the solution and not part of the problem, by making sure that all programs and policies are coordinated and mesh rather than conflict.

Those are tough challenges.

To address them, USDA has followed the example of the mid-1930's and asked the local people about their concerns, experience and suggestions. We asked them to help us determine the problems and the priorities. Through the Soil and Water Resources Conservation Act, or RCA, the response has been extremely encouraging.

As the Soil Conservation Service and several other USDA agencies work together to compile the first appraisal and program this year, they will have the excellent input of almost 200,000 people through public meetings in nearly every county. This is crucial public participation.

I think we will have the best idea we have ever had of the real scope of the natural resource challenges--and we will be building a national program from the local point of view rather than the other way around.

I deeply appreciate the thoughts and the information that conservation district leaders and their partners have shared with us to make this fresh start possible.

You may be sure that when the first package is ready later this year, you will have the opportunity to make additional comments.

At the same time, USDA is making some gains in better coordination of Federal programs. We are helping get the Federal house in order in improving land use and management in the public sector, and in providing consistent information to local and state governments on their initiatives in improving the patterns of land use. We are looking at and being advocates about wetlands, prime farmlands, and other specific natural resource questions.

We have a number of recent working agreements with other agencies to share data collection or interpretation, to help design or review rules and regulations, and so on. Out of this teamwork approach with the Environmental Protection Agency, Office of Surface Mining, Fish and Wildlife Service, Geological Survey, Bureau of Land Management, and others, will come a variety of programs that more closely fit local needs.

We are also taking a closer look at every conservtion program to be sure that the benefits it is supposed to bring about, do in fact occur--to make each program or project more accountable as a public expenditure, and to aid in designing future efforts.

For example, we have just begun an environmental quality monitoring program for small watershed projects, in cooperation with conservation districts and other sponsors.

We will begin by looking at one of every five watershed projects approved for planning beginning this year. We will try to document the detailed environmental and land-use situation that exists--the "before picture." Then we will follow the project through installation and for about three years into the operation and maintenance stage, to find out what the real impacts and responses are.

You can help us use the information to develop stronger projects and to let more people know the full results of our watershed actions.

I am excited about the prospects.

I hope you will also take a careful look at your individual conservation district programs and the critical priority items.

If every district does not now have an updated long-range program, with a mechanism for a periodic check for needed changes in emphasis, and with a specific plan for wide distribution of the program, now is the time to ask, "Why Not?"

You cannot afford to "get comfortable" with any of your programs, either. What are the most important things you want to accomplish? Are you succeeding? Do you need to make any changes? Who can help you? How can you help yourselves?

I know we can work together in the 1980's more closely than we ever have before--you and county ASC committees, county Extension agents, SCS field staffs, FmHA officials, and our state and national counterparts. I know we can create together a soil and water conservation program from the ground up that will fit tomorrow's needs.

The future of American agriculture depends on it.

The future of American land and water resources demands it.

The future of our society will arise from it.

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